

STRATEGIES FOR IDENTIFYING AND COUNTERING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

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*A spaniel, a woman, and a walnut tree,
the more they're beaten, the better they be!*

— *old English proverb*

*A wife isn't a jug:
She won't crack if you hit her ten times.*

— *Russian proverb*

*"When did you stop beating your wife?" "Who said I
stopped?"*

— *American vaudeville joke*

*A wife is like a Persian carpet: the more you beat it the better it
becomes.*

— *Arab proverb*

These disturbing proverbs, taken from different areas of the world, indicate that wife-beating (domestic violence) is not a new or a culturally delimited phenomenon. Rather, the practice seems to have been considered an acceptable, even a desirable, method of solving marital problems for thousands of years. Although the term "domestic violence" is new, the practice is ancient.

Why did domestic violence come to the forefront of social attention and discussion in various countries over the last two decades? Is it due to the demands of feminists calling for women's human rights? If so, did these demands encourage women to realize that their basic human rights have never been legally and officially safe-guarded and respected? Could the new attitudes expressed by women have elicited from men feelings of threat, *i.e.*, simply by demanding her rights, does the woman communicate to the man that this will entail his losing certain rights? Do threatened men then retaliate to protect what they perceive as a threat to their "territory"?

Or could it be that domestic violence has been highlighted because social organizations have realized the damage that domestic violence is wreaking in women's lives, thus reducing their potential productivity while also threatening their children's mental health and social adjustment? Whatever the reason, or combination of reasons, the fight against domestic violence has begun in earnest. More and more studies are being undertaken to document its frequency, the nature of abuse, the

profiles of the people involved, and the possible causes of violence in the home in an effort to find adequate solutions for a problem that has caused immeasurable pain and suffering throughout the world.

In Lebanon, no statistics have yet been compiled on the frequency of domestic violence. A number of concerned women were interested in carrying out such a project. Their efforts, however, were stymied by the lack of cooperation by some officials who felt that such a study would constitute an unwarranted intrusion into people's private lives. Two factors make gathering objective information on domestic violence in Lebanon rather difficult and inexact: the sanctity of the family — the idea that nobody should know what goes on inside the home — and a lack of knowledge about which behaviors constitute domestic violence.

Domestic violence has been defined in different ways by various organizations. It is most often understood as any act committed by one person with the intent to hurt or cause damage to another. This hurt could be directed against the body of the other person, such as killing or seriously wounding, or slapping, shoving, kicking, pulling hair or indirectly attacking property valued by that other person, *etc.* This is physical violence, the most commonly acknowledged type of violence, which most people mistakenly assume is the only kind of violence. Few people realize that what is now called psychological violence can cause just as much, if not more, damage. Psychological violence can be verbal or non-verbal: it consists of attitudes, behaviors, or words directed against the identity, soul, and self-esteem of the other person in order to attack, hurt or control her. Forms of psychological violence are name-calling, constant criticisms, derogatory comparisons, silence, and the use of isolation as a form of punishment. Psychological violence also encompasses control of a person's activities, and often involves control of her money. (A more extensive discussion of the many forms that psychological violence can take was presented in an article by this author which appeared in *Al-Raida*, Vol. XI, No. 65/66: 21.)

Some people might ask, "if arguing, fighting, disagreeing, being assertive, and defending one's rights are considered violent, can anybody safely vent his or her feelings and frustrations without violating the rights of another?" None of the preceding actions, if done in good faith, *i.e.*, with a spirit of respect and with the

intent to help find a solution to a problem concerning both partners, can be considered violent. Domestic violence is the use of intentional physical or psychological abuse to control, maintain control, or otherwise obtain through the use of force what the other partner does not want to give willingly. It is exhibited by the person who behaves or talks to the other as if she had no value, no feelings, no rights, self-esteem or self-respect.

As a professional interested in domestic violence, I was invited to participate with a group of women from several other Arab countries in a two-week seminar in the U.S. sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee. The aim of the workshop was to discuss and research issues concerning domestic violence in various cultural contexts. One of the first issues we discussed was whether abusers and victims could be easily recognized. Did they fit particular psychological profiles? A common myth, which still remains in the minds of many, is that the victim of abuse usually asks for it in some way or another. This question has been answered by a recent study entitled *The Myth of Women's Masochism*: "Masochism was often attributed to battered women...although several studies have refuted this thesis....The notion that the victim is somehow to blame for her plight nevertheless persists in many of society's attitudes." In another book, *Domestic Assault on Women*, the author reports that whenever a phenomenon cannot be understood, it is then directly attributed to "some trait indigenous to the person" and since nothing that has been done to date has successfully halted domestic violence, then the cause must be in the victim." One key trait common to most battered women is that they are usually economically dependent on their husbands and they often have young children they seek to protect.

Like the victim, the abuser also does not neatly fit a particular psychological profile: "abusers come in all forms, in all professions and all socio-economic classes," as J. B. Fleming, in her book, *Stopping Wife Abuse*, reported. However, abusers do tend to share the following common characteristics:

- 1) extreme jealousy, displayed by their need to keep the mate completely controlled and isolated;
- 2) a marked inability to tolerate frustration;
- 3) a poor self image;
- 4) a pervasive pattern of blaming others for problems;
- 5) a history of having been abused as a child or of having witnessed abuse of one's mother by one's father; and
- 6) the acceptance of violence as an appropriate problem-solving method.

If neither the abuser nor the victim begin by wanting a violent and abusive relationship, then what happens to create such a state of affairs in the home? And once the relationship becomes violent, why do so many women stay? In an article entitled "Relation of Threatened Egotism to Violence," which appeared in *The Psychological Review* (1996), the major stimulus for vio-

lence in men is explained as a volatile combination of high esteem and ego threat "... when favorable views about one's self are questioned, contradicted, challenged...or otherwise put in jeopardy, people may aggress. In particular, they will aggress against the source of the threat. It is mainly the people who refuse to lower their self appraisals who become violent." In a recently published book, *Masculinity in Crisis*, the author (a male psychotherapist), states that "it seems a straightforward assumption to make that the new wave of feminism has produced a crisis in masculinity." Could it be, then, that men, upon finding their mates suddenly challenging them on certain issues which, until now, they felt were indisputable, feel insulted and react violently?

Another attempt at explaining violence between spouses appeared in an article in *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 22 (3): 222, and observed that "violence in intimate couple relationships is, in part, a distance-regulating mechanism which maintains a balance between separateness and connectedness in the relationship." This theory, which the author developed from case studies in the psychoanalytic literature, contends that through socialization, men learn to fear too much connectedness, though they are drawn by it, while women want connectedness and fear autonomy, which they have learned to perceive as rejection. So, when men feel that they have been drawn into a connectedness relationship a bit too close for their comfort, they may lash out violently to protect their sense of "I", which they feel has been compromised by the "one-ness" of the relationship. According to this theory, men use violence to protect and balance distance in their relationships, violence being a "powerful strategy of intimidation to regain control over the woman."

If valid, this theory might also explain why couples involved in domestic violence rarely leave each other: the good periods may be experienced so intensely that they take away from the anguish of the abusive periods. However, in domestic violence, the "ups" become rarer and rarer while the "downs" always increase in frequency. So, why don't women leave?

One reason could be that the abused person, through the phenomenon of self-blame, keeps hoping that by constantly changing her behavior and adapting it to the expectations of her mate, she might finally be able to fix things. Too late does she discover that no matter what she does or says, her partner's demands just change and increase. He is never satisfied. By then, desperation, if not depression and/or several forms of anxiety or even psychosomatic illnesses, could have rendered an already weak woman even weaker.

Another consideration for many women, should they finally decide to leave, is that their parents, families and society in general will not approve of a woman leaving her husband. Instead of receiving sympathy and support, women are often blamed for

not having been patient enough, or not appreciating their luck, or not knowing how to conduct a successful relationship. Moreover, women might justifiably fear the sudden change in their social and economic status, not to mention the loneliness, and perhaps even the scorn, they might face following a divorce. Other women may fear for their own safety or for the safety of their children, and in some cases, even the safety of the ex-husband. Many abusers have been known to threaten to commit suicide or do some other harm if the victim leaves.

Most women, however, never leave; they have been so traumatized that they become convinced of their own inadequacies and unworthiness. They feel they have no chance of succeeding, hence they do not even try. Finally, some women might have already been so abused as children that they do not realize that there are alternatives to this way of life. Such doubly abused women usually stay and accept their dismal fate. They cannot believe that they are worthy of a healthy and happy relationship, having never experienced one in their entire lives.

Searches for the causes of domestic violence are on-going. Most research has suggested that there is not one, simple cause; every situation has its own characteristics. Regardless of the causes, one thing is certain: the effects of domestic violence are painful and long-lasting, not only for the two people immediately involved in the violence, but also for their children and their children's future. In women, the effects of violence are many and diverse. They may range from death (as in crimes of honor in Lebanon, where the "guilty" woman has to pay with her blood to remove the shame her family experiences because of her immodest behavior, or the large percentage — according to a recent United Nations Report, an American woman is physically abused every eight seconds — of women in the U.S and Canada who are murdered by husbands, ex-husbands, and boy-friends), to serious bodily injuries such as broken limbs, hemorrhaging, sprains, torn ligaments, burns, *etc.* Women who have been systematically abused are more vulnerable to disease, psychosomatic illnesses, anxiety attacks and depression. Some women become so desperate that they turn to alcohol or drugs for relief, thus becoming addicts, which merely compounds their problems. Some women may even attempt suicide. No matter what their response, most women subjected to abuse find themselves unable to complete their jobs satisfactorily, whether outside or inside the home. They might neglect taking care of themselves, their homes, or their children, towards whom they may vent some of their intense feelings of anger and frustration, an act which only serves to increase their guilt and further devastate their fragile self-esteem.

As for children, the consequences of abuse can be long-term and drastic. Children may suffer two kinds of abuse: direct abuse, *i.e.*, beatings (many studies have shown that men who abuse their mates often abuse their children as well, particularly the oldest child), or indirect abuse, *i.e.*, the mother may take out her

anger on the children, or the parents will let children witness terrifying scenes of marital violence which disrupt their delicate emotional equilibrium. The children quickly learn that they cannot talk frankly about the situation; instead, they have to cover up for their parents in front of relatives and neighbors, thus learning early in life how to live a lie. They might exhibit an escape-avoidance reaction, *e.g.*, they will either live in fantasy worlds in which all is calm and loving, or they may begin to steal, lie, fight, and become unruly as a reaction to their insecurity. Some children may experience acute and paralyzing feelings of guilt, self-hate, depression or anxiety; they may become apathetic and uncaring towards other people and even towards their own needs. Many children, unfortunately, model the violent behavior they witness daily in the home and adopt it as the only or best way to solve problems, and then carry that belief into adulthood, thus replicating the entire cycle in their own families.

What can be done to confront and change this difficult situation? As was noted earlier, efforts in the domains of legislation and counseling have not been effective in halting violence in the home. It often seems that women cannot acknowledge that violence is actually being done to them until abuse becomes physical, and of the severest kind. Very often, I observe that women unquestioningly accept the fact that neither their husbands nor their children pay any attention to their needs or demands. In our society, ignoring a wife and mother is viewed as something very normal, something which women should simply accept. In the words of one woman I saw in my counseling practice today: "My job is to clean up after them, all day long. If only I could have a maid! But they wouldn't even think of helping me by being more tidy. I have to scream to get their cooperation, and I don't want to scream all the time; I'll feel like a witch or a nag. So what is the result? I never get what I want. If at least they would acknowledge me, or they would talk to me or ask me what I need... But it's always 'no', whatever I ask for. I have to give everything to them and to myself. I'm so tired — it's hard to be a woman!"

In my opinion, a first but very important step in stopping the effects of domestic violence, if not the violence itself, is to start by acknowledging that it is happening. Another step is to accept the fact that you have feelings and needs of your own, and you have a right to them. Nobody has the right to put you down and hurt you without explaining why and allowing you to present your own point of view. Once the situation is acknowledged, once the victim gets in touch with her feelings and realizes that she has rights that have been slighted, then something must be done to correct the situation. Domestic violence rarely disappears on its own, as many women might wish would happen. Help should be sought from external sources, whether a therapist, a priest, a social worker, or a doctor. The important thing is to realize that if nothing is done, the situation will deteriorate. It rarely, if ever, improves.